

## POST-TRAUMATIC ADDICTION SYNDROME

No, there's really not a recognized syndrome by this name....but maybe there should be! Families of loved ones who struggle with a member's addiction issues operate on adrenalin for months, and even years, as crisis after crisis is discovered, addressed, endured, and moved toward resolution. Every imaginable threatening circumstance is on the list of potentially devastating outcomes...from loss of life due to overdose, violence at the hands of drug dealers, criminal charges resulting in incarceration, financial loss and possible ruin, mental and physical exhaustion, fear, depression, dashed hopes, societal contempt and isolation....to name a few.

But what happens once the road begins to straighten out? What happens when the crises have passed, the outcomes are known, and genuine recovery is underway? How do we return to a normal life where the sight of a police car does not evoke a feeling of dread, where a ringing phone is welcomed rather than feared, where we can actually lose something without fear that it has been stolen, where we can leave our keys on the table, our checkbooks and wallets on the dresser at night, and feel confident, secure and happy as we go about our daily lives? And how much time must pass without crisis before we really believe that life has returned to normal?

Drawing on my own life experiences, I have concluded that it is possible to be restored to normalcy after a number of years under great stress; however, "normalcy" needs to be redefined. Following my service with the Marine Corps, during which I spent a year in combat, I was able to transition back to civilian life quite quickly with very few symptoms of post-traumatic stress....but my life had been forever conditioned to the "fight or flight" fears that had been so deeply imbedded in me from that year of constant danger and trauma. "Normal" for me when I came back home meant that a loud noise would only terrify me for a few seconds; life and the pursuit of happiness took on a whole new meaning; I appreciated my freedom and the security of our civilization at a whole new level; I learned to appreciate and celebrate every day of my life with optimism and appreciation. I was one of the lucky ones. "Normal," though, had changed. My new "normal" didn't look much like my pre-combat "normal," nor has it ever looked like that in the 40+ years that have passed since that trauma so deeply impacted me.

Likewise, I am convinced that a return to normal is possible for the families of loved ones who have struggled with addiction. As with my pre-combat vs. post-combat experience, though, "normal" will never again look like it did before the addiction and its associated stress entered the picture. Our senses will have been sharpened and our knowledge of the issue will have deepened. The addiction and all of its associated trauma will always be in our minds, but not necessarily "top of mind," once a genuine recovery is working its magic. Time is the most influential element in our return to "normal" and it is also the most difficult to quantify.

How much time without trauma must pass before we are comfortable allowing other life issues to dominate our thoughts and actions? How long must we wait before real FUN enters our lives again? When will it be ok to go into a deep and relaxing sleep at night, feeling confident that no horror will occur and that our slumber won't be interrupted? How long before a routine telephone call from our affected family member elicits joy instead of concern? At what point do we transition from **receiving** support from other affected families to **providing** support?

These are all very difficult questions to answer except to say that it is different for everyone. In our family's case, the absence of crisis is about to enter its fourth year, our son's recovery appears to be genuine, and we have indeed returned to a more normalized life. Did it happen after two years? Or one year? I'm not sure when we hit the pivot point, but I do know that we are happier now than at any time in the past ten years. We have successfully "returned to normal" with its new definition. We survived.

With that said, though, here are some of the differences in our “new normal” from the life we had before addiction entered the picture:

- We still react with a nanosecond of panic when the telephone rings.
- We feel a very brief moment of apprehension when we see a police vehicle on patrol in our neighborhood.
- We occasionally doubt our son’s word, even when he’s telling us the absolute truth.
- We do occasionally wallow in the fear that “this is too good to be true....when will the other shoe drop?”
- We overlay our son’s name on the names of the characters in drug-related news stories and shudder to think that it could be us who are dealing with whatever tragedy has been described.
- We consider Bridge To Hope family support group to be an important part of our lives and feel compelled to help others find hope, encouragement and ultimate success in the recovery process while we continue to receive benefits for ourselves.
- We acknowledge that our son’s addiction could re-appear at any moment, which never allows us to totally drop our guard.

So how did our family get to this point—this point of normalcy? Time passed, recovery started, crises ended and peace and tranquility were restored to our family. Underlying this progression of events was a resolute faith in God and His plan for our lives, inspiration and shared experiences through the Bridge To Hope family support group, an unrelenting positive attitude, tenacity, cessation of enabling, an effective rehabilitation program (Teen Challenge), and an unconditional love for our son that never wavered. Ten years ago, recovery (a return to “normal”) was the goal and today it has been achieved. The journey was arduous and at times seemed impossible to navigate, but the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel was visible all the way. Today, having emerged from that tunnel into bright sunshine, the flickering light that was so hard to see a decade ago has blossomed into an awesome landscape of possibilities, opportunities and happiness.

I believe that the old saying, “Time heals all wounds,” is true for the most part. What we must remember, though, is that even healed wounds leave scars. The same is true with our return to normal....the burden will be lifted, joy will return, life will go on...but the scars of our trauma and the determination with which we confronted it will be with us forever. It would be naïve for us to believe otherwise and it would be unrealistic to expect “the perfect life” after what we have been through. The good news, though, is that it **really is** possible for us to recover from this stress and to lead happy, productive, fulfilling and “normal” lives once again!